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ABSTRACT

This study assessed common concerns of school-age children. Participating were 138 children in grades 1, 3, and 5. Concerns were spontaneously generated by children during Phase 1 of the study, and common stressors most frequently mentioned were ranked on a 10-item rank-order task during Phase 2. In Phase 3, children completed questionnaires measuring their manifest anxiety and locus of control. In Phase 4, children's understanding of the concept of worry was assessed in semi-structured interviews with a small subsample. Findings indicated that fifth graders were significantly more worried about school than younger children. They were also more concerned about peer acceptance and the future than third graders. Third graders were more concerned about getting in trouble than fifth graders. Similar grade differences were found in children's rankings of common concerns. Fifth graders were again significantly more worried about school problems than younger children. Fifth graders were significantly more worried about family members getting hurt than third graders. First graders were significantly more worried about smoking and drugs than third graders. Fifth graders were significantly less anxious and had a significantly more internal locus of control than third graders, who in turn were significantly less anxious and had a significantly more internal locus of control than first graders. First graders exhibited less ability to verbally express their understanding of the concept of worry than older children. First graders were more likely to associate worry with sadness, while older children were more likely to associate worry with fear. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/KB)

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Common Concerns of School Age Children

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Abstract

This study assessed common concerns of school age children (N = 138; 70 girls, 68 boys; grades 1, 3, and 5). Concerns were spontaneously generated by children during Phase 1 of the study, and the common stressors most frequently mentioned by children in Phase 1 were ranked by them on a 10-item rank-order task during Phase 2. In Phase 3 of the study, children completed written questionnaires to measure their manifest anxiety and locus of control. Finally, in Phase 4, children's qualitative understanding of the concept of worry was assessed in semi-structured interviews with a small subsample of the children. Grade differences existed in the common concerns mentioned spontaneously by children. Fifth graders were significantly more worried about school than were first and third graders. They were also more concerned about peer acceptance and the future than were third graders. Third graders were more concerned about getting in trouble than were fifth graders. Similar grade differences were found in children's rankings of common concerns. Fifth graders were again significantly more worried about problems with school than were first and third graders. Fifth graders were significantly more worried about family members getting hurt than were third graders. First graders were significantly more worried about smoking and drugs than were third graders. An examination of manifest anxiety and locus of control revealed that fifth graders were significantly less anxious and had a significantly more internal locus of control than third graders, who in turn were significantly less anxious and had a significantly more internal locus of control than first graders. Finally, it was found that first graders exhibited less ability to verbally express their understanding of the concept of worry than did third and fifth graders. First graders were more likely to associate worry with feelings of sadness, while third and fifth graders were more likely to associate worry with fear.

Common Concerns of School Age Children

Parents, educators, and researchers have long been interested in stress and coping in children (Chandler, 1985; Compas, 1987; Maccoby, 1983; Rutter, 1988), and in children's worries and concerns (Garmezy, 1983; Ryan, 1988; Yamamoto, 1979). Lists of childhood stressors typically include divorce, loss of a parent, birth of a sibling, war, poverty, and child abuse (Garmezy, 1983). However, events considered as childhood stressors are based primarily on *adult* perceptions of childhood stress. Do adult perceptions accurately reflect actual concerns of children? Some research suggests not.

Yamamoto (1979) studied 367 fourth through sixth graders and found differences between what children reported as stressors, and what adults thought children would report. He found that although children ranked the death of a parent at about the same stress level as adults, children were more likely to perceive fights between parents and failing grades as much more stressful than adults thought they would. Additionally, stressors such as hospitalization, moving, and birth of a new sibling were rated by children as much less stressful than adults believed.

In addition to adult-child differences in perceptions of level of stress, studies also show adult-child differences in what constitutes a stressor. Ryan (1988) reports that the five stressors most frequently mentioned by children are feeling sick, being bored, not having enough money to spend, pressure to get good grades, and feeling left out of the group. Additionally, Ryan notes that adults frequently underestimate the personal significance to school age children of being smaller or larger than their peers, feeling left out, and being pressured to try something new. These stressors are rarely included on measures of childhood stress because adults do not perceive them as being stressful.

In order to explore the question of what school age children perceive as stressors, we asked children to tell us, in their own words about the types of things they worry about. Their answers were then used to construct a rank-order task to measure the extent to which school age children worry about the common stressors that they mentioned. Additionally, a measure of manifest anxiety was given to assess children's levels of generalized worry. Children also completed a locus of control scale. Finally, a smaller sample of children were asked to give qualitative descriptions of how they knew when they were worried and how being worried made them feel. Because this study was part of a larger research project that examined environmental concern, specific predictions for the results described here were not made.

Method

Participants

Participants were 138 children (70 girls, 68 boys) from the first (n = 37), third (n = 49), and fifth (n = 52) grades who attended an elementary school located in a Midwestern city. Children were primarily Caucasian and middle class. Letters describing the project and including the parents' consent form were

sent home with all students in the first, third, and fifth grades. Only those children with parental permission participated in the study.

Measures

Childhood Concerns Rank Order Task. The Childhood Concerns Rank Order Task (CCROT) is a 10-item rank order task that measures children's concern about environmental problems relative to common childhood worries (e.g., doing well in school). The CCROT contains three environmental concerns (e.g., air and water pollution) and seven non-environmental concerns (e.g., death and dying). Of the seven non-environmental concerns, five were common to all three grades, and two were unique to each grade.

When the CCROT is administered, children are presented with the 10 concerns relevant to their grade, and asked to choose which concern worries them the most. Once that concern is chosen, it is removed from the list, and children are asked to choose their greatest worry from the remaining concerns. The procedure continues in this manner until all 10 concerns are ranked, from most to least concern. (Complete information concerning the construction and administration of the CCROT is available from the authors.)

Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale. The Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale (LOC) contains 40 items that measure children's locus of control. Examples of items include: "Do you believe that wishing can make good things happen?" and "Are some people just born lucky?" Higher scores indicate a more external locus of control (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973).

Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale. This 37-item scale (CMAS) was developed by Reynolds and Richmond (1978) to measure manifest anxiety in school age children. Examples of items on this scale include: "I worry a lot of the time" and "I am nervous." Children are instructed to answer yes or no for each question. Twenty-eight items on the scale measure anxiety, while the remaining nine items are used to assess whether the child is answering truthfully. Higher scores indicate higher levels of anxiety.

Procedure

Phase 1. In Phase 1 of the research, children were asked "What kinds of things do you worry about?" in a one-on-one informal session with the first author. She recorded each response the children made during these sessions. (Since the primary purpose of the larger study was to assess children's concern about the environment, children who did not spontaneously mention an environmental concern were given several prompts to elicit information about environmental concerns.)

Phase 2. During this phase, children completed the CCROT in individual sessions with the first author. She reviewed each item on the CCROT with the child, making sure that every item was understood. Children then proceeded to rank all 10 items on the task from most to least concern.

Phase 3. In Phase 3 of the research, children completed written questionnaires in a group setting. All children completed both the CMAS and the LOC. In addition, third and fifth graders completed the Children's Home Environmental Practices Inventory, a 10-item checklist developed by the researchers, and the Self-Perception Profile for Children, a 36-item perceived competencies measure (Harter, 1985). Finally, all children completed the Children's Attitudes Toward the Environment Scale (Musser & Malkus, 1994), a 25-item environmental attitudes questionnaire. Only results pertaining to the LOC and the CMAS are discussed here.

Phase 4. As part of the larger study, differences between children evidencing the highest and lowest levels of environmental concern were examined. Children who scored the highest (n=18) and lowest (n=16) in environmental concern participated in an informal, semi-structured interview in a one-on-one session with the first author. Each interview consisted of a series of open- and close-ended questions about children's environmental concern and worry. In addition, as part of the interview, children were asked "How do you know when you are worried?" and "How does being worried make you feel?" Answers were recorded on tape and were also written down by the first author at the time of the interview. Results pertaining to these two questions will be discussed as part of this study.

Results

Children's Concerns

Each of the children's responses (N=383) collected during Phase 1 interviews was transcribed onto an individual card. Nineteen coding categories were developed through an iterative process of classification, discussion, and reclassification. A mid-range level of specificity was used for categories, similar to that described as a basic level of conceptualization by DeVilliers and DeVilliers (1992). Once these categories were developed, two graduate coders independently sorted responses into the 19 categories. All discrepancies were resolved so that reliability between coders was 100%.

As illustrated in Table 1, grade differences existed in children's concerns. Fifth graders were significantly more worried about school than were first graders, $z = -3.15$, $p < .01$, and third graders, $z = -2.77$, $p < .05$. Fifth graders were also more concerned about peer acceptance, $z = -2.54$, $p < .05$ and the future, $z = -2.54$, $p < .05$ than were third graders. Third graders were more concerned about getting in trouble than were fifth graders, $z = -2.30$, $p < .05$.

Ranking of Concerns

Results from Phase 1 were used to develop the CCROT. Five common concerns were selected based on the most frequent answers that each grade shared in common. Personal injury, family members being hurt, death and dying, and violence and crime were at the top of each grade's list of concerns. In addition, problems with school was selected since it was among the top concerns of both third and fifth graders, and near the top of the first graders' list. For the purpose of the larger study, three environmental

concerns were chosen based on the most frequent environmental concerns generated by children in the three grades. These included air/water pollution, animals becoming extinct or endangered, and littering. Finally, two unique items for the CCROT were chosen for each grade. These items were chosen by looking at the two highest ranked items on each grade's list, after the five common and three environmental concerns had been removed. First and third graders shared one additional item in common – smoking and drugs. The first graders' list also included loneliness, while the third graders' list included family members being sick. For fifth graders, the two unique items were peer relationships and the future.

Children's rankings of the five common and two unique concerns are presented in Table 2. A series of 2 (sex) x 3 (grade) analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted utilizing the rank orders of the common and unique concerns as dependent variables. While no significant sex differences were found, results revealed several significant grade differences. Concerning problems with school, a significant effect was found for grade, F (2, 127) = 15.52, $p < .0001$. Duncan's Multiple Range Test revealed that fifth graders were significantly more concerned about problems with school (M = 5.23) than were first (M = 2.45) or third graders (M = 3.33). Concerning family members getting hurt, a significant effect was also found for grade, F (2, 127) = 3.11, $p < .05$. The post hoc test revealed that fifth graders were significantly more concerned about family members getting hurt (M = 7.71) than were third graders (M = 6.41). Finally a significant effect was found for grade, F (1, 79) = 6.96, $p < .01$ concerning smoking and drugs. First graders were significantly more concerned about smoking and drugs (M = 7.42) than were third graders (M = 5.88). Results related to environmental concerns are not presented here, but can be found in Malkus and Musser (1997).

Locus of Control and Manifest Anxiety

There was a significant positive relationship between manifest anxiety and external locus of control, $r = .55$, $p < .0001$. The more external the child's locus of control, the greater the level of manifest anxiety. A 2 (sex) x 3 (grade) ANOVA was conducted with anxiety scores as the dependent variable. A significant effect was found for grade, F (2, 121) = 14.52, $p < .0001$. Duncan's Multiple Range Test revealed that fifth graders were significantly less anxious (M = .30) than third graders (M = .48) who in turn were significantly less anxious than first graders (M = .60). A second 2 (sex) x 3 (grade) ANOVA was conducted utilizing locus of control as the dependent variable. A significant effect was found for grade, F (2, 120) = 12.83, $p < .0001$. The post hoc test revealed that fifth graders had a significantly more internal locus of control (M = .35) than third graders (M = .44) who in turn had a significantly more internal locus of control than first graders (M = .50).

A correlation matrix was also run between manifest anxiety, locus of control, and the average ranking of each of the items on the CCROT. Significant correlations were found between many of these

variables, but these findings were generally specific to a particular group (e.g., fifth grade boys only), and were not found across the wider sample. For example, significant positive relationships were found between locus of control, manifest anxiety, and the average ranking for the CCROT item problems with school. The more external the locus of control and the higher the level of manifest anxiety, the higher the average ranking of that item. However, these relationships were largely confined to fifth grade boys. Due to difficulties in interpreting certain grade/sex discrepancies, these results are not reported here, but are worth further investigation in examining how locus of control and manifest anxiety relate to each other and to specific stressors.

Qualitative Discussion of Worry

Children evidencing the highest (n=18) and lowest (n=16) levels of environmental concern participated in a semi-structured interview. Children were asked "How do you know when you are worried?" and "How does being worried make you feel?" First graders exhibited less ability to verbally express their understanding of the concept of worry than third or fifth graders. When asked how they knew when they were worried, most first graders stated that they did not know. By contrast, third graders were able to list physical indicators of worry (e.g., "When my heart beats real fast") and also cognitive indicators of worry (e.g., "When I think about it a lot, and I can hardly think of anything else"). Fifth graders were, not surprisingly, the best at describing how they knew when they were worried. Typical fifth grade responses were highly descriptive (e.g., "When my heart starts beating hard and fast. I get nervous. I bite my nails.") and most fifth graders could describe multiple ways that they could tell when they were worried. One fifth grade girl stated, "I cry a lot. I feel really stressed. I get sick. I get headaches. I don't talk to anyone. I get frustrated and mad." (See Table 3.)

Common feelings associated with being worried also differed by grade; younger children reported feeling sad, while older children reported feeling scared (See Table 4). Some first graders reported that being worried made them feel sad or unhappy, but almost a third of the first graders were unable to describe how being worried made them feel. By contrast, all of the third and fifth graders were able to describe how being worried made them feel. For third and fifth graders, the most frequent response was feeling scared. Fifth graders were again highly descriptive and varied in their responses. One fifth grade boy stated that being worried made him feel like "Oh please God. Oh please God…" while one fifth grade girl stated that being worried made her feel "Stressed and very upset. I can't look at anyone in the face, and I feel that it's all my fault."

Discussion

This study assessed the common concerns of school age children utilizing a format in which children were asked to generate a list of worries, rather than simply responding to a list of adult-generated worries. This departure from the common methodology was in response to studies by Yamamoto (1979)

and Ryan (1988) that suggested that adults' perceptions of childhood stressors do not accurately reflect children's actual concerns. Results from this study are consistent with this earlier research. Lists of childhood stressors typically include divorce, loss of a parent, birth of a sibling, war, poverty, and child abuse (Garmezy, 1983). While some of these items were spontaneously mentioned by children (e.g., divorce, death) others were not mentioned at all (e.g., birth of a sibling, war, child abuse). In addition, the most common worries were stressors not typically found on adult-generated lists, including loneliness, personal injury, and smoking/drug use. Other frequently mentioned childhood worries concerned problems with school, worries about family members getting hurt or sick, worries about peer relationships, and concerns about violence and crime.

Significant grade differences were found in children's spontaneously mentioned concerns. Fifth graders were more worried about school than were first and third graders, and were more concerned about peer acceptance and the future than were third graders. Third graders were more concerned about getting into trouble than were fifth graders.

Children's spontaneously mentioned concerns were used to generate a 10-item rank-order task to assess children's rankings of common childhood stressors. It was felt that by utilizing children's own responses to generate the instrument, the rankings would be more reflective of children's actual levels of concern about specific stressors. Results revealed significant grade differences in the rankings of common stressors by school age children. First graders were significantly more worried about smoking and drugs than were third graders. Fifth graders were significantly more worried about school than were first and third graders, and were significantly more worried about their family members being hurt than were third graders. However, there were many similarities between grades as well. Concerns about violence and crime ranked high, regardless of grade. Concerns about death and dying were ranked in the top three by both third and fifth graders, while first and fifth graders shared high rankings of concern about family members getting hurt. Again, results support the need to utilize child-generated lists of stressors when assessing children's worry, since many of the top ranked items are not typically found on lists based on adult perceptions of childhood concerns.

An interesting relationship was found between locus of control and manifest anxiety. Results revealed that there was a significant positive relationship between anxiety and external locus of control. Specifically, the more external a child's locus of control, the more likely he or she was to experience high levels of anxiety. Additionally, results indicated that fifth graders were significantly less anxious, and had a significantly more internal locus of control than third graders, who in turn were significantly less anxious, and had a significantly more internal locus of control than first graders. This finding is consistent with the literature on coping and resiliency. Luthar (1991) found that an internal locus of control (the belief that forces shaping one's life are largely within one's own control) was involved in a variety of

processes that helped protect children from stress, and that children with an external locus of control showed greater declines in functioning with increasing stress levels.

Finally a qualitative examination of children's understanding of the concept of worry revealed grade differences. First graders exhibited less ability to verbally express their understanding of the concept of worry, while fifth graders gave responses that were highly descriptive. Additionally, most fifth graders could describe multiple ways that they could tell when they were worried, while first graders most typically stated that they did not know. Grade differences also existed in children's responses to a question about how worry made them feel. Younger children reported the being worried made them feel sad or unhappy, while older children more frequently reported feeling scared. Again, first graders had difficulty answering, while fifth graders gave descriptive and varied responses.

Overall, the results of this study indicate the importance of utilizing child-generated lists of stressors, rather than adult perceptions of childhood worries, when assessing school age children's concerns. Additionally, the study highlights the need for more research into the developmental nature of worry, specifically changes that occur in both amount of worry and the types of things that children worry about. Finally, a significant relationship between manifest anxiety and locus of control was found. The effects of locus of control on level of anxiety will be worth continued exploration in future research. This relationship may also be of interest to parents and professionals searching for strategies to help children cope with everyday stress.

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Table 1

Concerns of First, Third, and Fifth Grade Children and the Proportion of Children Who Spontaneously Mentioned Each Category as a Concern

	Grade			
Type of Concern	First (n=24)	Third (n=41)	Fifth (n=27)	Total (n=92)
Personal injury	33.3%	24.4%	14.8%	23.9%
Family getting hurt	16.6%	22.0%	18.5%	19.6%
Violence/crime	16.6%	14.6%	11.1%	14.1%
Natural disasters or fires	4.2%	12.2%	7.4%	8.7%
School	8.3%	17.1%	48.2%	23.9%
Pets	4.2%	12.2%	3.7%	7.6%
Smoking/drugs	6.6%	17.1%	3.7%	13.0%
Family fighting or divorce	8.3%	12.2%	3.7%	8.7%
Death and dying	8.3%	17.1%	11.1%	13.0%
Environment	4.2%	12.2%	0.0%	6.5%
Concern for others	12.5%	7.3%	0.0%	6.5%
Loneliness	20.8%	4.9%	11.1%	10.9%
Social behaviors	8.3%	17.1%	0.0%	9.8%
Family health	4.2%	22.0%	7.4%	13.0%
Money/possessions	0.0%	2.4%	7.4%	3.3%
Peer relationships	0.0%	0.0%	14.8%	4.4%
Future	4.2%	0.0%	14.8%	5.4%

Table 2

Children's Mean Rankings of Common Concerns on the Childhood Concerns Rank Order Task

		Grade			
Common Concern Items		First (n=36)	Third (n=44)	Fifth (n=48)	Total (n=128)
Family getting hurt	Mean	7.08	6.39	7.75	7.09
	SD	2.49	2.45	2.44	2.50
Violence/crime	Mean	6.42	6.84	6.88	6.73
	SD	2.89	2.35	2.46	2.54
Death/dying	Mean	6.03	6.64	5.85	6.17
	SD	2.54	3.18	3.11	2.98
Personal injury	Mean	4.70	4.75	5.54	5.03
	SD	2.58	2.55	2.30	2.48
Problems with school	Mean	2.47	3.48	5.31	3.88
	SD	1.59	2.44	2.95	2.70
Loneliness	Mean	3.78	----	----	3.78*
	SD	2.37			2.37
Smoking/drugs	Mean	7.42	5.82	----	6.54**
	SD	2.37	2.73		2.68
Family getting sick	Mean	----	6.80	----	6.80*
	SD		2.80		2.80
The Future	Mean	----	----	4.85	4.85*
	SD			2.44	2.44
Peer relationships	Mean	----	----	4.81	4.81*
	SD			3.08	3.08

Note. Items that were presented to children from only one grade are indicated by a single asterisk (*). For those items, the number of children in that total sample is equivalent to the number of children in the grade. Items marked with a double asterisk (**) were given to first and third graders (n = 80).

Table 3

Proportion of Interviewed Children Who Mentioned Different Ways They Knew When They Were Worried

	Grade		
Response Categories	First (n=11)	Third (n=11)	Fifth (n=12)
Did not know	72.7%	27.3%	16.7%
Named a specific worry	9.1%	9.1%	25.0%
Physical discomfort (e.g., stomachache, feel sick)	9.1%	18.2%	33.3%
Shaky	------	27.3%	8.3%
Fixation/can't concentrate	------	9.1%	16.7%
Other physical behaviors (e.g., stutter, bite nails)	------	------	33.3%
Panicked/stressed	------	------	16.7%
Miscellaneous	18.1%	18.1%	33.3%

Note. Children were asked "How do you know when you are worried?" Children sometimes mentioned more than one way that they knew when they were worried, therefore proportions per grade do not necessarily total 100%.

Table 4

Proportion of Interviewed Children Who Mentioned Different Ways That Being Worried Made Them Feel

	Grade		
Response Categories	First (n=11)	Third (n=11)	Fifth (n=12)
Did not know	27.3%	------	------
Scared	9.1%	36.4%	25.0%
Sad	45.5%	27.3%	25.0%
Unhappy	18.2%	9.1%	------
Upset/stressed	------	9.1%	16.7%
Miscellaneous	------	45.5%	66.7%

Note. Children were asked "How does being worried make you feel?" Children sometimes mentioned more than one way that being worried made them feel, therefore proportions per grade do not necessarily total 100%.